

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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It's a monumental decision that affects us every day.

William S. Richardson:

It does, and I go swimming too. And I know I can walk to a certain spot, and this is public property. And my friends and I can use it.

Candy Suiso:

And for our kids, we want them to be the best at whatever they choose to be. And be honest, contributing citizens to our community. To come back, to give back, and just to do what's right in life. Do what's right, even when no one's watching.

Henk Rogers:

The game business is bigger than the movie business. Sometimes, I see young people, and they go: I want to be a game designer, I want to get into the game business. To get into the game business today, you can't just be good; you have to be brilliant.

How can you spot a truly creative mind, an innovator and problem-solver? Do they share similar personality traits? Are they smarter than the rest of us? More confident, more daring. Coming up on Long Story Short, three very different, all practitioners of original thinking.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Original thinkers reveal themselves as they assume a variety of roles within our community. What is that special motivation or skill that inspired a chief justice, a public schoolteacher, and a videogame creator turned philanthropist? All three trusted their instincts, their sense of priority and free-thinking.

First, we'll turn to a 2009 conversation with a man known as CJ, a nickname given to the late Hawai'i State Supreme Court Chief Justice William S. Richardson. He was a public school graduate who grew up in a working class Kaimukī family during the 1920s. He championed Hawai'i's Democratic Party during its rise to power in the 50s, and served as lieutenant governor during the John Burns administration. He was the State's chief

justice during some of the most formative years in Hawai'i's history, when a young island state searched for its sense of identity and fundamental values.

You were one of the people that was excited about statehood, that helped to make it happen, that recrafted government in the wake of statehood. And now, we're coming up on the fiftieth anniversary of statehood, 2009. Many Hawaiians don't see that as cause for celebration.

Well ... to me, it's great cause for celebration. We're part of a great country. Like every other state in the union, they had to come up and live, and have their new laws jive with the old. Even if you go back to England, where the common law came over, and if you looked at the way the law went across the country right through the Louisiana Purchase where the French came in, and the country had to adjust to that. And now, we must still look at how it affects the Far East and all the other countries and states and islands throughout the Pacific Ocean.

Part of what is now, is based on the Great Māhele, King Kamehameha III. And it was a distribution of land. Do you think that was pono?

I think it's pono. I think our leaders of the past were as good as any that ever existed, that our Hawaiian ways were just ways of living. And Hawai'i should revive what we could of the good parts. And I would say almost all of it were good parts.

You could have used the English law as a precedent, but often, you would look back to see what ali'i from the Monarchy days did.

Well, whenever I could, whatever the history books would come up with on old Hawai'i and what few things that I had picked up over the years, I felt that I should try to apply those to the extent that we could.

For example, when the question came, who owns the new land being created by lava from the volcano, what was the answer of your court?

Well, that seemed easy enough for me, but I know the beaches were needed in Hawai'i. Without our beaches, there was no Hawai'i to speak of, the Hawai'i that we loved.

Now, in many parts of the continent, the beaches are private property; right?

Yes. It seemed perfectly logical to me that people should be able to use the beaches, and that the property lines could not follow all of the methods of old England, say, and that I should try to bring those cases up in line to the way the Hawaiians did it.

And that wasn't the only big one you did. There were the rights of citizens to challenge Land Court decisions, Native Hawaiian rights, and use of private property water.

Again, I wasn't that much of an expert on Hawaiian law. But I had a good court. They were willing and able to go and look at all of the problems, and see what was going on. And I traveled around the islands a lot. And you're speaking now perhaps of water right, which was so important, because we were a plantation community. And you get to a case like when two plantations began to argue over how much water they could have. They both needed water. But when a third one began to take too much water, to the detriment of some of the others, then you had to decide whose water should it be. The Robinson case in the end was clear to me, but it seemed revolutionary, I suppose. But the people who really needed the water were those on the bottom of the streams, the taro patch and the rice patch owners. They're the ones that needed the water. And so, it seemed simple to me to just say: Well, neither of you is entitled to all of that water; it's the people down below, the taro patch owners and the rice patch owners.

It's elegantly simple. I actually talked with the dean of the law school, which is named after you. Avi Soifer said imagine, you know, very complicated filings, going on for years, big battle, and you said: Well, let's take a look at what's happening at the end of the line.

Well, and we were a new state, not used to following and just being a follower. We needed to decide for ourselves what was best for our people.

You took some heat over that.

I did.

But it became a symbol of enlightenment. People said, you know, here's a far-thinking guy using the past to build on the future.

Well, of course, I'm glad to hear you say that. And I thought it was right. There was never any question in my own mind.

Chief Justice William Richardson, for whom the law school at the University of Hawai'i is named, was an original thinker, in the right place at the right time, and his legacy is embedded in the constitutional laws of our state.

Sometimes, the journey that brings the right original thinker to the right place and time is really not much of a journey at all, but no less impactful. In our 2009 conversation with Candy Suiso, she said that when she graduated from Wai'anae High School, she thought she wanted to get away from the Leeward Coast community, and never come

back. Thankfully, this second-generation teacher and Milken Award winning educator had a change of heart. Although she would insist on sharing the credit, today, Suiso's legacy is the national Emmy Award winning Searider Productions at Wai'anae High School. It is not only the largest, most successful digital media center any school in the state, it's the driving force behind a movement to improve a challenged community from within.

I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to give back to a community that was very good to me. I really felt that that's where I was the most needed. It felt right. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be in a community that raised me. And it was the right thing to do; I just felt that that was the right thing to do. And it was the right decision, when I look back.

Much of what you've done at Wai'anae High School wasn't done, really, within the system. You had to find ways to equip yourself and your students with grants. You had to become a grant writer to get the proper equipment, the space.

M-hm. Within the DOE, there's so many limitations, and there's only so much money to go around. And part of our success is, I believe we've learned to work around the system, and been very successful in, like you said, going after a lot of grants. A lot of support, pulling together partners, pulling together people that believe in you; that's been our success. We had to prove our self. You know, like you said, the right people at the right time started to notice these students, and started to give. Because they were doing things with nothing. When we first started, we started in a classroom with no air conditioning, with very little equipment.

And by the way, heat isn't just bad for people.

It's so bad.

It's bad for equipment.

We would pack fifty kids, forty kids in a classroom, and it was hot, and no air conditioning. But you know, those kids never grumbled. They never grumbled because they didn't have an air-conditioned room or top of the line equipment, like a lot of other schools did. Instead, they just started to create projects, and they did some pretty good projects, and people started to notice. That's what happens; people started to notice.

How did they know they could do that? What got them started?

You give them the tools. As educators, you know, the team of educators, there was enough people out there that said: You can do it; of course, you can do it. Make a video; here, here's the tool, here's the camera. Here's your tool; here's how you do it.

The essence of video production, as I look at it, is storytelling. What kind of experience do you think your students had in storytelling?

They are born with the gift to tell a story. I really believe their success is because they are born with the gift to create. The kids out in Wai'anae, I really believe, are the most creative, loving storytellers. Because they grow up; they don't grow up with a lot. I really believe that they don't grow up with a lot, so they entertain themselves by playing the 'ukulele, sitting around talking story, they draw, they doodle, they sing. And it carries over. When they come to us, they're so strong, their heartfelt creativity carries over with this tool. All of a sudden, we have these expensive toys now that we give them, and we say: Go create. And they're great.

And they just take to it.

And it's amazing; it's incredible.

You didn't have the star pupils of Wai'anae High School. Some of your kids were doing really poorly in other classes, they were reporting to school from their homes on the beach in tents.

M-hm. We have the homeless, we have kids whose parents have been in jail, they are abused, they come to us. You know, a lot of dysfunction; so much. And you know, that's my world; I grew up there, and I know that world. And they come to us, and we give them hope. For a lot of these kids, it's their security. We're their family. We teach them a tool, and they become successful at it. And they see something that they create, and for their self-esteem, it's: Wow, I did that. You know, it gives them hope. And they realize: I have just learned something that I can do for life. And a lot of these kids' lives have been turned around. They would have dropped out, I really believe. And they'll tell us that too: If it wasn't for this class, I would have dropped out, or I didn't know I was gonna go to college, or I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. And now, so many of our kids are college graduates.

They're being recruited by television stations.

They're being recruited.

And advertising agencies.

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

I remember when your Seariders first started doing public service announcements for various clients, you invited the business community to hire the kids and said, "We'll see what we can come up with for you." And I just remember as a professional television person at that time, how the students' work had so much more depth than what you would normally see in a PSA, a public service announcement, because the kids knew that world, as you mentioned. When it was about crystal meth, they brought a reality to it that nobody had brought before.

These kids know what it's like to living in houses and homes where there's crystal meth, where they have to be in a car where someone's been drinking.

They know how it hurts.

They know how it hurt. And it was their stories. If you look at any of those PSAs, those are their stories. That was either them, or that was someone they knew, and they were able to come up with the ideas from the heart, from real life. And I think that's what makes their work so powerful. It's real stories. They tell their stories. Whether it's a news story, a public service announcement, a commercial, they're just telling their story.

Tell me about if can, can.

If can, can; if no can, no can. Because you know, there's nothing worse, we feel, than saying you're gonna do something, and not do it, and not follow through. And we tell these kids: If you're gonna do something, if you're gonna say you're gonna do something, hold yourself to it and do it, follow through and do it. Because really, there's nothing worse than not completing something that you've committed to. And if we could teach them now in school, it will carry over in life, in a job, in a marriage, in a relationship.

And when you work in teams, you know other people are counting on you.

Yes; 'cause it's teamwork. And the good thing about our program is, every project that these kids do is a team effort. And we always think, when you leave our program, if you have learned nothing about video production, about creating a web page, about page layout, a newspaper, we hope you've really learned the importance of teamwork, cooperation—

And getting things done on time.

Meeting deadlines, respect, respect for self, respect for other people, respect for property. So, if you're gonna say you're gonna do something, you better do it, because if you don't, you're dropping the ball for your teammates. But just don't say

you're gonna do something if you can't do it, 'cause you let everybody down. So, if can, can; if no can, no can. And it's been our mantra. And the kids, they get it; the kids get it.

Where do you think this movement will take the Wai'anae Coast?

I hope eventually it will take them out of poverty. It might take decades, but this is certainly a start. You have a group of young adults that are really making a difference, because they have come back to the Wai'anae Coast, and they are giving back, and they believe in themselves, and they're believing in the students that are under them. And they are trying very hard to prove to the rest of the world that we're just as good as everybody else, if you just give us a chance.

Perhaps educator Candy Suiso would have provided inspiration for our next original thinker, who nearly dropped out of high school. In 2016, visionary entrepreneur Henk Rogers told us that he took the one and only elective course offered at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. When he learned everything there was to know about that elective in computer science, he saw no reason to remain in school. But he did graduate from high school, and Henk Rogers has made a fortune in the video gaming industry, most notably for bringing Tetris, one of the world's top-selling videogames, from Russia to the rest of the world. More recently, this Hawai'i resident and visionary entrepreneur has turned his talents to no less than saving the planet. He made that leap when suddenly confronted with just how fragile his own life could be.

I found myself in the back of an ambulance with a hundred percent blockage of the widow-maker. That is the artery, the biggest artery in your heart, and it will kill you if it's blocked. And so, I was lucky, 'cause I kind of felt it coming, and they called an ambulance for me, and so, I was already on the way to Straub. And then, I realized, because they were gonna take me in for observation; they said: There's nothing really wrong with you, we'll just take you in for observation, we won't even turn on the siren. The siren went on, the guy who was taking care of me was in the cockpit talking to the hospital and saying—I didn't hear, but I knew he was saying: This guy is not even gonna make it, get an operation room ready, an operating room ready, blah-blah-blah. And I'm back there saying: You gotta be kidding me; I haven't spent any of the money yet. You know. I was going: Oh, is this some kind of a joke? I worked so hard all my life, and finally sell my company, get a bunch of money, and I'm on the say out? And then, the second thing I said: No, I'm not going, I still have stuff to do. And it's kind of like, I thought, you know, what are the things that I've always talked to myself that I was gonna get done in life, and that I hadn't even started? And that just made me say: No, I'm gonna do this. And so, I was in the hospital recovering, and the next couple weeks I didn't go back to work. I had my chance to think about my bucket list. And I said: These are missions in life. And the first mission came to me in the back of the newspaper. It was like, in the back of the newspaper, it had a story about coral. Oh,

by the way, we're gonna kill all the coral in the world by the end of the century. And you know, I moved to Hawai'i, and I fell in love with the ocean. I used to dive, surf on the North Shore, and I couldn't believe that we would do something so callous as to kill all the coral in the world. Islands are made out of coral. And you know, you look a little bit further, and it's like a third of the life in the ocean is dependent on the coral existing. So, I said: No, no, we're not allowed to do that. What's causing that? It's ocean acidification. What's causing that? Carbon dioxide going into the ocean is causing that. So then, my first mission is to end the use of carbon-based fuel. And so, I started the foundation, and recently, we had a big success in Hawai'i, that Hawai'i has made the mandate that they were gonna be a hundred percent renewable by 2045, for electricity. And that is a huge step in the right direction.

And your Blue Planet Foundation had a role in that.

Oh, I would say we're the ones who created that legislation and fought for it. And, you know, 'cause when you create a piece of legislation, then you have to work with all the politicians, and you gotta get enough politicians to get behind it, to get it passed. So, it's not good enough to just come up with the words, 'cause it's—it's all the pushing that goes on. I guess it's called lobbying.

Yes, it is.

And you're already off the grid at your home in Honolulu, and on the ranch.

Yes. So, we were studying storage, and we finally decided that we were gonna just get off the grid on the Big Island. And so, we tested the different storage technologies, and now we ended up with a battery technology that basically runs by itself.

What are some of the things that prepared you to have the career you did, which was something you made up yourself? You didn't follow a template for it. What were some of the formative things along the way?

I think one of the things is that I always had a deep-rooted feeling that whatever it is that I wanted to do, I could do it.

Where did that come from?

I think it came from New York. It's kind of an attitude that we had in high school. We stopped the war in Vietnam. Okay; we didn't specifically, but we were part of it. And that kind of energy, the feeling that youth can change the world, and that is a very important feeling. And I need the young people in Hawai'i to have that feeling. They need to take ownership of their future, and make Hawai'i the example of sustainability.

This videogame creator, environmentalist, the public schoolteacher, and the chief justice; three original thinkers. What they seem to share is an unwavering persistence to push, to get it right, and have confidence in the choices they make. We're honored to revisit our conversation with the late Chief Justice William Richardson, and we thank Candy Suiso and Henk Rogers for their inspiring stories. I'm Leslie Wilcox for Long Story Short. Mahalo to you for joining us. Aloha nui.

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Were you ambitious?

Not that I know of.

But you went ahead, and went through four years at UH.

I went four years at UH, and enjoyed it all the way through.

Met a lot of people who would later be your allies in politics.

Yes, yes.

And good friends.

Good friends; they helped me in everything I've done.

You went to UH, and you had more than most people of your time had, a college degree, but that wasn't gonna be the end of your higher education.

Well, I thought it was, but I had a job with the oil company, and I thought: Well, this would be great, I like this kind of work; I think I'll do this the rest of my life. And then, one of the professors up at school went to see my father, and he said: Now, this boy better go on to law school. And well, how can you do that Dad; you can't afford it. Well, he said: You know, if you're really gonna go, I'll rent your room out, and you go on to college. Which he did. In those days, it was five days by steamship, and another four days by train to get to the East Coast.

Your mom was a legendary teacher on the Wai'anae Coast; right?

Oh, thirty-one years of her life, she dedicated her life to teaching out there. And really, that was her life. She impacted a community, and thirty years, just taught at Mākaha Elementary School. She went there, and she never left. I know the principal would

always throw all of these hardcore kids and say: Okay, Mrs. Smith, you're the one that's gonna take these kids. And she would turn them around. She was mean, but she was very strict, and she was very fair, and she loved them all. And she did; she turned a lot lives around.

When I started my company, I used my Hawai'i experience of ARRG, which is playing Dungeons & Dragons. And personal computers happened, and I thought: This is my chance. So, I made the first roleplaying game in Japan. But I didn't speak, read, or write Japanese, and I hacked that computer and got my wife to try to read something in the manual, but she knows nothing about computers. And so, that was also like hocus-pocus that was coming out of them. Anyway, I hacked my way through the game, made it. So, there were no roleplaying games before The Black Onyx, and it became the number-one game in 1984, and it was the number-two game in 1985. So, it had a two-year reign. And now, something like thirty percent of all games in Japan are roleplaying games. So, you know, people that are in the industry that meet me and find out that I wrote Black Onyx, they say: Oh, my god, you're the reason I'm in this industry, you know.